Occupational Hazards

By Coach Jack Dunn

“Too bad all the people who know how to run this country are busy running taxicabs or cutting hair.” —George Burns

So, you’re the coach...

Reflecting back upon 19 years of coaching high school baseball, 18 years of coaching American Legion baseball, and 20 years of Division I college baseball, it is apparent to me that two major problems are common to all of us coaching baseball and softball at all age levels. If we agree with the thesis that “misery loves company” (that is, having companionship while experiencing discomfort serves to make that discomfort lighter) it should be reassuring to recognize these two major problems:

1. Everyone’s an authority.
2. Parental interference.

Beginning coaches may feel their problems are unique. With experience, however, it will become apparent that these problems are common to most coaching situations. It is hoped that experienced coaches will gain some solace as they recognize and identify with the problems presented here.

Everyone’s An Authority

Baseball is peculiar in that it is a relatively easy game to understand. There are no complicated offenses or defenses as exist in other sports—the action is slower and easier to follow. Furthermore most people have played some form of baseball or softball during their life, or are engaged in coaching some youth teams. These circumstances cause many fans to believe they are qualified to make judgments concerning the conduct of the game.

Consequently, one of the occupational hazards of being a baseball or softball coach is that you will be second-guessed. (Remember: you have one guess... everyone else has two!)

From a more positive standpoint, the appeal of baseball or softball can very well be attributed to the fact that fans do feel they understand the game, even if not to the degree they may presume. Realistically, they do not have the knowledge, the ability to implement that knowledge, or the organization talent necessary to field a team that will play to its capacity.

We should be concerned only with those individual who overstep the bounds of propriety and openly challenge our judgment or authority. These people, thank goodness, are in the minority, but they tend to destroy team morale. Most of them know everything about baseball and coaching, except how little they know. They must be confronted, won over if possible, and if not, at least silenced.

Parental Interference

This problem exists at all levels of play, but to varying degrees. The lower the organization or age level, the more problems you will have. There are more problems with parental interference at the Little League level than at the high school level, and high school has many more problems of this type than the college level of play.

Players are an extension of their parents’ ego, and many parents are vicariously playing the games of reliving their lives through their children. This is fine, but a problem results when a parent gets overly involved emotionally and creates a negative situation out of what otherwise would be positive experience for their child.

This usually occurs when their child is not playing regularly, and rather than admit that he or she may not have sufficient ability, or may not be physically mature enough to merit more playing time, the parent projects the blame upon the coach, and the coach becomes the scapegoat for the athlete’s inability to measure up to the hopes and aspirations of the parent. If the player is led to believe that he or she should be playing more or starting, the player will feel cheated, become bitter and may harbor resentment toward the coach. This is grossly unfair to both the athlete and the coach. In reality, the animosity toward the coach is a manifestation of the parent’s own frustrations.

Ideally, parents must be objective in terms of the athlete’s abilities. The sole criterion for success should be, “Does the athlete play to his or her capabilities?” and not the parent’s ego. It may take more effort for on player to “make the end of the bench” than it does for another to play regularly or star. Therefore, the benchwarmer is as successful as the star when effort is the yardstick.

So relax! Give yourself credit for the knowledge you possess. You’re a professional in your field. You’re the one willing to put your time in and you’re the one making it possible for the kids to have a team, a league, and a place to play.

Nice going! We need more people like you!
Good Luck!

This is an excerpt from Jack Dunn’s book, *From the Third Base Coach’s Box*—Paperback available for purchase at lulu.com for $21.95, or ebook version at barnesandnoble.com for $9.99.